

Staff Report

Measure A Citizens' Oversight Committee



Item Title	Agenda Date:
Fire Department Update on Year One of the CVFD Fuels Crew to the Measure A Citizens' Oversight Committee	October 10, 2024

Department: Fire

Recommended Action

Citizens' Oversight Committee to hear a report on accomplishments of the Fuels Crew during the first year of the pilot program.

Discussion

BACKGROUND

In September 2023, with the support of the Measure A Citizens' Oversight Committee, the Fire Department launched the Chula Vista Fire Department (CVFD) Fuels Crew to implement a hazardous fuels reduction program. The goal of this program is to mitigate wildfire risks within the wildland-urban interface, protecting both lives and property while promoting healthy, fire-resilient landscapes.

During its first year, the Fuels Crew focused on building the foundation of the program. This included onboarding staff, providing essential training and certifications, and collaborating with the Development Services Department and Public Works Open Space Division to understand the local open space environment, Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) regulations, and to complete initial clearance projects. The Fuels Crew also played a vital role in supporting all-hazards responses, such as fire suppression and winter storm mitigation.

In addition to these efforts, the Fuels Crew achieved Type II Handcrew certification, enabling it to serve as a mutual aid resource for agencies within San Diego County and across California. It is one of the few local government handcrews in the state.

As the Fuels Crew was not established until September 2023 and became fully operational in December, the first year's budget was not fully utilized. The Emergency Management Division continues to apply for hazard mitigation grants to further support the program. Successful grant applications will help offset costs, allowing any savings to be reinvested in the Fuels Crew for necessary supplies and equipment.

DISCUSSION

Review of Year One

The CVFD Fuels Crew was established in September 2023. Two Captains and one Firefighter Paramedic took on the special assignment of developing the Fuels Crew and its hazardous fuels reduction program. The initial months were dedicated to building the foundation of the program, which involved creating a program document, researching the local open space environment and wildland-urban interface, building relationships with other City departments, recruiting and training personnel, and procuring necessary supplies and equipment.

A key achievement was the creation of a comprehensive program document by the Fuels Crew Supervisors. This document provides guidance on the Fuels Crew's mission and the hazardous fuels reduction program's direction. To ensure the program adhered to City regulations, the Fuels Crew collaborated with subject matter experts from the Open Space and Planning Divisions, gaining an in-depth understanding of the rules surrounding vegetation removal in both protected and non-protected natural areas.

The crew members underwent extensive training and earned their Firefighter Type 2 certification. Training remains a top priority, ensuring crew members are well-prepared to prevent and manage wildfires. Ongoing rigorous training continues to sharpen their skills in fuel reduction, handcrew operations, and emergency response. This training not only ensures the safety of the crew but also boosts their ability to protect the community from wildfires.

In their first year, the Fuels Crew completed four hazardous fuel reduction projects, clearing over 60 acres of vegetation that posed a direct threat to homes. Projects took place in Flairbanks Open Space, Kumeyaay Park, Discovery Canyon, and Del Rey Canyon (East). These efforts were coordinated with the Open Space Division and Development Services Department, following the guidelines of the MSCP. Environmental biologists were also involved to protect native species and habitats while eliminating invasive species.

Beyond fuel reduction, the Fuels Crew supported fire suppression efforts by responding to emergency calls and conducting "fire mop-up" operations, which helped reduce the need for additional resources at the scene. The crew was called upon to assist with several incidents in the city and multiple requests from partner agencies throughout San Diego County. As the Fuels Crew's reputation grows, requests for their assistance are expected to increase.

As a result of their extensive training, certifications, and strong performance, the Fuels Crew qualified as a Type II Handcrew. The primary responsibility of a handcrew is fireline construction, where crew members use chainsaws and hand tools to create firelines tailored to the fuels, terrain, and weather conditions. Type II handcrews can perform initial attack, direct and indirect fireline construction, mop-up operations, and controlled burns under qualified supervision.

In September, the Fuels Crew, designated CV CREW 1, was deployed for the first time to assist with the Line Fire in San Bernardino. During their 11-day deployment, the crew performed well on their incident assignments and received strong performance reviews.

Year Two – Focus Areas

With over 40 open space/canyon areas in the city, the Fuels Crew intends to continue prioritizing hazardous fuels reduction activities. Hazardous fuel reduction activities can occur year-round; however, they are best when completed during the fall and winter months, outside of bird breeding

and nesting season. There will be a concerted effort to provide defensible space protection and hazardous fuels reduction in the Otay River Valley to address the fire threat to homes and businesses along the northern rim.

The Fuels Crew is also awaiting approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to complete project work on the remainder of canyon areas (Surrey Ridge, Snake Canon, and Chute Canyon) outlined in the Hazard Mitigation Grant Award. Currently, FEMA is conducting environmental reviews and performing project work/spending the grant funds is not allowed until receipt of the notice to proceed.

In addition to fuels reduction work, the Fuels Crew will continue supporting fire suppression operations and routine training to maintain certification as a handcrew. We anticipate that the CV CREW 1 will deploy more frequently during their second year.

There was a total of \$2,300,256.04 in Measure A fund balance approved to be spent over fiscal years 2023-24 (\$750,256.04), 2024-25 (\$775,000), and 2025-26 (\$775,000). Because the Fire Department was able to secure grants and utilize the Fuels Crew in various deployments, the amount spent in fiscal year 2023-24 was less than anticipated. This savings will be incorporated into future funding priorities and brought before the committee once a spending plan is developed.

Current-Year Fiscal Impact

N/A

Ongoing Fiscal Impact

N/A

Attachments

Fuels Crew Year One Presentation

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